

III. SERVICES FOR PERSONS WHO ARE BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED

In California, there is no centralized Bureau or Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Many different public and private agencies offer services directed to the various needs of the visually impaired population.

It is sometimes difficult to know what services the various agencies provide and how they can be contacted. The following brief descriptions are designed to give you an initial understanding of how the system works and how to access the services you need.

Several state and county departments provide educational, employment, financial, and health and welfare services. However, many very important services are provided by individual private non-profit agencies located throughout the state. These services include, but are not limited to, adjustment to blindness counseling, peer counseling, support groups, mobility training, training in independent living, low vision services and various educational and recreational activities.

Since these private agencies are independent of each other, there is no uniformity throughout the state in what programs are available. You will need to check with the agency nearest you to find out what programs and services it offers. A list of "California Agencies" is included in the "Directory of Resources" section of this ***Handbook***.

The following is an overview of the available services and how they are accessed.

ADJUSTMENT COUNSELING AND SUPPORT GROUPS

Adjustment to vision loss can be a slow and painful process. The length and difficulty will vary with each individual and will include several stages. Losing sight, even a mild loss, is much like other losses. It usually requires a grieving process including denial, anger, depression, and finally, coping. Experiencing these phases is normal. However, the process should not be allowed to go on too long. The sooner you take steps to accept and cope with your vision loss, the sooner you can resume your normal activities and maintain control over your life. If you are having any trouble moving through and beyond these stages of loss, please reach out for help. The adjustment process can be made easier and shorter with help from caring professionals and from others who have gone through the same process.

Support groups are a wonderful source of inspiration. While providing strong emotional support, they also supply a great deal of useful information about resources available in the community and about coping strategies that have worked for others. Some support groups are focused on a specific condition such as Diabetes or Macular Degeneration. Others are for anyone experiencing sight loss. Some groups

include spouses or significant others while others are only for the individual.

Whatever the design or make-up of the group, it is almost inevitable that good positive results happen from people coming together and sharing feelings and encouragement. Individual counseling is also available both from trained professionals and from peers.

Larger agencies, such as the Braille Institute in Los Angeles, the Rose Resnick Lighthouse in San Francisco and the Society for the Blind in Sacramento, as well as many of the smaller agencies, provide a variety of counseling and support options. Check with the agencies closest to you. See the listing of “California Agencies” in the “Directory of Resources” section of this ***Handbook***.

INDEPENDENT LIVING

Perhaps the most important services the newly visually impaired individual needs are those directed to developing the skills of independent living. The importance of being able to take care of oneself cannot be overemphasized. Visually impaired people, including totally blind people, can and do perform the Activities of Daily Living (ADL) independently and competently. Even if you live in the home of another or in a group living situation, it is essential that you learn to take care of these functions yourself.

ADL include grooming and hygiene, meal preparation and clean-up, wardrobe and household management, handling of personal finances including paying bills, communication and medication management. Learning these skills may be challenging for persons with limited vision, but mastering them is central to the maintenance of self-esteem and self-direction.

One of the major challenges you will face, as a newly visually impaired person is to maintain control over the decisions affecting your life such as where you will live. The more independent you are the more freedom you are likely to maintain. Family members may rush to your side to help and protect you. They are well intentioned and acting from their love and concern. However, if their efforts to assist you prevent or discourage you from pursuing the rigorous process of learning to be independent, neither you nor they will be satisfied with the results. You will not want to be treated like a child who cannot take care of himself/herself or make adult decisions. Others may tire of the responsibility of meeting your basic needs. If both you and they adjust to your vision loss and you maintain your independence, all of your relationships will remain healthier and more satisfying.

Learning independent skills is simply a matter of mastering alternative techniques for doing each task. Competent teachers can show you many ways to accomplish all of the ADL. There is ADL training available both from the Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) and from many private agencies for the blind.

The DOR has two kinds of programs designed to provide ADL training. The Counselor/Teacher (C/T) program provides services at or near the client's home and the Orientation Center for the Blind (OCB) is a residential rehabilitation center dedicated to independent living for people with severe vision impairments.

The C/T program provides a variety of services which include daily living skills, home management, orientation and mobility, communication skills, business methods, counseling (personal and/or vocational) and special services, if needed. The C/T program can also purchase assistive devices that help a person function independently.

The focus at the OCB is on the acquisition of new skills such as adjustments to new vision disabilities, adaptive skills, and immersion in an atmosphere that is respectful and knowledgeable about the abilities of blind and visually impaired people. Participants live in dormitories for seven to nine months while attending daily classes that encompass all phases of independent living. This is an intense program designed to teach the person how to cope with sight loss and it has proven to be very effective in creating self-reliance and reducing dependence on family and friends. The decision to apply to the OCB occurs between a consumer and his or her Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor.

To apply for the C/T program or admission to the OCB, contact the DOR District Office nearest you. A list of these offices is included in the “Directory of Resources” section of this ***Handbook***.

Other sources of Independent Living Skills training are the private non-profit agencies serving the blind and visually impaired mentioned in the “Adjustment Counseling and Support Groups” section of this chapter. The larger agencies provide individualized ADL training in the homes of clients. Many also have classes at their agencies. Contact the agency nearest your residence to inquire about these services. To find a local agency, refer to the listing of “California Agencies” in the “Directory of Resources” section of this ***Handbook***.

LOW VISION SERVICES

Many people don’t realize that Low Vision Services are a specialty unto themselves. Low Vision Services are very important as they help individuals strengthen and make maximum use of residual vision. These services consist of a low vision evaluation, identification of appropriate low vision aids, training for the user, and follow-up appointments.

Qualified professionals must do low vision evaluations. A simple check of visual acuity is not a low vision evaluation. Low Vision Specialists are trained to analyze the individual idiosyncrasies of each person’s vision and to select magnifying lenses and lighting devices that best complement

that vision. The specialist will train the client on the use of low vision aids. Many Low Vision Clinics will let clients take devices home on a trial basis.

To find a local provider, refer to the listing “Low Vision Services” in the “Directory of Resources” section of this ***Handbook***.

EMPLOYMENT

In California, the DOR is responsible for providing employment services to persons with disabilities. These services include counseling about career or job selection, resume preparation, job search skills training, peer group support and the provision of various kinds of pre-vocational and vocational training. The DOR can pay for pre-vocational training, college or university, books, training materials and equipment needed for employment, such as uniforms, tools, computers, etc.

The DOR has branches throughout the state. To inquire about eligibility requirements and the application process for obtaining rehabilitation services, call the County Office nearest you and ask for the Rehabilitation Counselor for the Blind (RCB). Refer to the listing “California Department of Rehabilitation” in the “Directory of Resources” section of this ***Handbook***. Any branch that has a “**B**” designated on the listing has a RCB at that office.

READING SERVICES

Those of us who lose part or all of our ability to read realize what a monumental inconvenience this can be. From the daily newspaper, to our favorite books and magazines, to instructions on prescription medicines and labels on cans and packages in the kitchen, the need to get information from the printed word is constant and crucial.

There are several methods available to people who cannot read standard print to obtain most or all of these kinds of information. Some alternatives to standard print are Large Print, Braille, recorded material, and computer-produced synthesized speech. For a listing of radio reading services in California, refer to “Radio Reading Services” in the “Directory of Resources” section of this ***Handbook***.

For reading your mail, newsletters, magazines and items of personal business, you will probably need a volunteer or paid reader. Many agencies serving the blind and visually impaired offer volunteer reader programs. For a listing of these agencies, refer to “California Agencies” in the “Directory of Resources” section in this ***Handbook***.

LARGE PRINT

For people who need larger than standard size print, there are many options. Books, magazines, dictionaries, thesaurus, cookbooks, new periodicals, games and many other useful materials are all published in Large Print. For a listing of the

organizations that provide these services, refer to “Large Print Books” in the “Directory of Resources” section of this ***Handbook***.

NEWSPAPERS

Newspapers are available in three principal ways: Radio Reading Services, telephone access and the internet.

Radio Reading Services are available in many communities throughout the country. They consist of broadcasts transmitted over special closed circuit radio or T.V. channels. Volunteers read local newspapers, publications and a wide variety of local and current information that is relevant to their communities. Listeners need a special receiver which they obtain from the service provider. For a list of these service providers, see “Vendors of Assistive Technology” in the “Directory of Resources” section of this ***Handbook***.

Telephone access to newspapers in California utilizes synthesized speech to deliver an audio version of newspaper text to those who are blind or visually impaired. Newspapers are transmitted electronically to a central receiving station. Readers can telephone into this station at their convenience and have the option of several newspapers, which are read electronically via synthesized speech. The reader can select articles, skip material, browse and reread articles all through the use of the telephone touch tone keypad. The phone numbers for the four regional Radio Receiving Service centers are listed below.

Sacramento

(916) 654-0640

or

(800) 952-5666

San Francisco

(415) 557-4253

Fresno, Kings, Madera and Tulare Counties

(559) 488-3217

or

(800) 742-1011

Los Angeles

(323) 660-3880, ext. 1290

or

(800) 808-2555

A world of information is available on the internet, including many newspapers and magazines. Access to the Internet and other computer applications is available to blind and visually impaired persons through the use of screen enlargement programs, synthesized speech output and Braille output. For information on these technological solutions, see “Vendors of Assistive Technology” in the “Directory of Resources” section of this ***Handbook***.

“The New York Times” publishes a weekly review of its major articles. To subscribe to this publication, contact the New York Times Large Type Weekly at (201) 343-2244 or (800) 631-2580.

MAGAZINES AND BOOKS

The largest source for audio books and magazines in the country is the National Library Service (NLS) for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, which produces tens of thousands of titles every year on cassette tape and audio disk. There is no charge for this service. The NLS publishes a bi-monthly listing of all new titles, which is distributed to all patrons. The adapted cassette recorders and Talking Book machines required for listening to the books are provided free of charge by the NLS.

Many other agencies and publishers also produce books and magazines in recorded form. For a comprehensive list of such publishers, see the listing of “Producers of Audio Books and Periodicals” in the “Directory of Resources” section of this ***Handbook***.

In California, the NLS service is accessed through a network of four regional libraries. The website address for these libraries is: www.library.ca.gov/services/btbl.html.

The contact information for the four regional libraries is listed below.

Northern California Residents may obtain a print application form or download the online application from the California State Library by contacting:

Braille and Talking Book Library
California State Library
P.O. Box 942837
Sacramento, CA 94237-0001
Phone: (916) 654-0640 or (800) 952-5666
Website: www.library.ca.gov/services/btbl.html
E-mail: btbl@library.ca.gov

City of San Francisco Residents may receive cassette service from the San Francisco Public Library by contacting:

San Francisco Public Library for the Blind and Print Disabled
100 Larkin Civic Center
San Francisco, CA 94102
Phone: (415) 557-4253
Website: sfpl.lib.ca.us/librarylocations/accessservices/lbpd.htm
E-mail: lbphmgr@sfpl.lib.ca.us

Fresno, Kings, Madera and Tulare County Residents may receive cassette service from Fresno County Public Library by contacting:

Talking Book Library for the Blind Fresno County Free Library

770 North San Pablo Avenue

Fresno, CA 93728-3640

Phone: (559) 488-3217 or (800) 742-1011 and ask the County Operator for 488-3217

Website: www.fresnolibrary.org/tblb/index.html

E-mail: wendy.eisenberg@fresnolibrary.org

Southern California Residents may receive service from the Braille Institute by contacting:

Braille Institute Library Services

741 North Vermont Avenue

Los Angeles, CA 90029

Phone: (323) 660-3880 or (800) 808-2555

Website: www.braillelibrary.org/home.html

E-mail: bils@braillelibrary.org

Many publishers, such as the Reader's Digest Corporation, publish books and magazines in Large Print. For more information about Large Print and a comprehensive list of publishers, see "Large Print Books" and "Newsletters, Magazines and Journals" in the "Directory of Resources" section of this ***Handbook***.

RECREATIONAL MATERIALS AND HOUSEHOLD COMMODITIES

Many games are available in Large Print including playing cards, board games and crossword puzzle books. If you live near a service agency serving individuals with visual impairments, you will most likely find them at their “store”. If not, there are catalogs through which these can be ordered. For a listing of these catalogs, refer to “Catalogs of Merchandise” in the “Directory of Resources” section of this ***Handbook***.

Many household appliances have been adapted with large print or markings. These include alarm clocks, kitchen timers, thermometers, scales, yardsticks, rulers, and other measuring devices. Large Print overlays for telephone dials can be extremely useful. These household items may be available in the agency “stores” mentioned above. For vendor listings of household commodities, refer to “Catalogs of Merchandise” in the “Directory of Resources” section of this ***Handbook***.

LABELING PRODUCTS

People use many different methods of marking food and household items. One of the simplest is to add your own label, on which you or someone else has written the important information, with a bold marker pen in large letters.

MEDICINES

Ask the pharmacist to either type in Large Print or hand write in Large Print with a bold pen the instructions for each bottle or package of medications. Do not hesitate to let your doctor or pharmacist know that you need this service. They will do it. You only need to ask.

EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

The largest producers of educational materials are the American Printing House (APH) for the Blind and Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic (RFB&D).

The APH produces material for school age students. For information on available publications, refer to “Catalogs of Merchandise” in the “Directory of Resources” section of this ***Handbook***.

The RFB&D produces educational materials for students and non-students alike. If you need a training manual, cookbook, instructional material or any other educational item, RFB&D will record it for you. For information on available publications, see “Producers of Audio Books and Periodicals” in the “Directory of Resources” section of this ***Handbook***.

The California Department of Education’s Clearinghouse for Specialized Media and Translations (CSMT) provides instructional resources in accessible and meaningful formats to K-12 students with disabilities. Educational material adopted

by the State Board of Education is produced in a variety of formats such as: Braille, Large Print, audio recordings and Digital Talking Books. The CSMT is a supplier of APH products, as well as, the administrator for the APH Federal Quota Program for California students. This program allocates federal quota money for the purchase of APH products, based on the annual census of eligible students in California. For contact information for the CSMT, refer to “Large Print Books” and “Audio Books and Periodicals” in the “Directory of Resources” section of this ***Handbook***.

BRAILLE

Since its invention, in the mid-nineteenth century, by blind Frenchman Louis Braille, the Braille code has been used by millions of blind and visually impaired persons around the world, in dozens of countries and in many languages, to achieve literacy and to gain access to a world of knowledge and information.

Braille is a systematic code of “cells” of six raised dots which can be used in hundreds of configurations to represent letters, numbers, punctuation marks and common letter groupings. The Braille code is adaptable to various kinds of notation such as math, music and computer language.

Not all blind people read Braille proficiently. In fact, most Braille users are fairly slow readers and many visually impaired people never learn it at all. This is an extremely unfortunate

fact because Braille is an invaluable tool for persons who cannot read print.

The slow reader will not want to use Braille for reading lengthy materials such as books, newspapers and magazines. These items are available in other media. However, any individual who cannot read print must have a note taking system for communicating with himself/ herself. For example, think of the ever increasing volume of numbers in our lives that we must produce upon request such as credit card numbers, account numbers, social security, driver's license or state ID numbers, health plan numbers, loan numbers, etc. Imagine having to memorize all of these numbers and not having access to them without assistance. Another vital use of Braille is for making lists of names, addresses and phone numbers. We all use the telephone dozens of times a day. With a Braille Rolodex, a visually impaired person can make all of his or her calls without having to wait until someone else is available to read the numbers. Recipes, "to do" lists, appointment schedules and instructions of all kinds can be stored easily in Braille.

Learning Braille has two components: sensitizing the fingertips so that they can feel the dots and memorizing the different dot configurations. A grading system in Braille is used to categorize these dot configurations.

Grade 1 consists of the alphabet and the basic punctuation marks. This Grade is taught to people new to the use of Braille. Grade 2 includes short forms of words and contractions which represent syllables. Grade 3 is very similar to shorthand. Grade 1 is relatively quick and easy to master by

anyone who is motivated. Many persons go well beyond Grade 1. Even when beginning in their sixties and seventies, many people master Grade 2.

There are several sources of Braille instruction. Most private agencies for the blind and visually impaired offer Braille lessons which are usually taught individually by a Braille instructor. The DOR offers Braille instruction through its C/T program mentioned earlier in this section. Most Counselor/Teachers give Braille lessons in the client's home as a part of a rehabilitation program.

The Hadley School for the Blind is also an excellent source for Braille instruction. This is a correspondence school for persons who are blind and visually impaired. All lessons are mailed to the student's home and study is done at the student's own pace. Their contact information is:

Hadley School for the Blind

700 Elm Street

Winnetka, IL 60093-2554

(847) 446-8111 or (800) 323-4238

Website: www.hadley-school.org

E-mail: info@hadley.edu

Finally, there are Braille instruction books designed for a person to study and learn independently. However, most people find that it is easier to learn Braille by either using a personal instructor or by following a structured curriculum such as the one produced by the Hadley School for the Blind.

A good source of books and magazines in Braille is the NLS through its regional libraries. This was previously mentioned in the “Magazines and Books” section of this chapter.

There are also many other sources of Braille materials including religious books and pamphlets, computer manuals, cookbooks and “how to” books, etc. For a list of publishers of Braille materials see “Large Print Books” and “Producers of Audio Books and Periodicals” in the “Directory of Resources” section of this ***Handbook***.